



# Mishpacha

A virtual community for real Jewish families

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## Judaism and Death

How does the tradition help us grieve?

*"Jacob tore his clothes, he put sackcloth on his loins and mourned his son for many days, All his sons and daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. He said: No, I will go down to my son in mourning, to the grave." (Genesis 37:34-35)*

The regular rhythms of life cease when someone close to us dies. Overcome with grief we lose interest in the normal activities of daily life. At times the loss is so wrenching it seems almost as if our own lives have ended. Indeed, in the wake of death we wonder: How can we go on?

Jewish mourning rituals both honor the dead and provide a structure for the mourning process. When we are most desperate for direction and solace, the tradition is ready with a step by step guide to help us through the most difficult and painful moments of our lives.

### Stages of Mourning

As psychologists have noted, grieving is a process. Jewish tradition recognizes several stages of mourning, moving from total absorption in grief, to complete re-engagement in everyday life.

1. The time between **death and burial** (*aninut* in Hebrew)
2. The **seven days** following burial (*shivah*, meaning seven)
3. The first **30 days** after burial (*shloshim*, meaning thirty)
4. The **first year**.
5. **Keeping memory alive**.



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Each stage has specific mourning practices, enumerated in the next section. At the end of the first year the mourning period comes to a close. Beyond these initial periods of mourning, there are yearly opportunities built into the calendar for remembering those we lost. *Yahrzeit*, the anniversary of death and *Yizkor* (remembrance), a liturgical piece recited on certain holidays, are both opportunities to remember and mourn the loved one.

## Death and Burial

### Suspending daily routine (*aninut*)

Death overshadows nearly everything else. The tradition refers to this period as a time when "the dead lies before one." Recognizing this otherworldly state, the tradition suspends the mourner's responsibility for prayer and other daily *mitzvot*, acknowledging the depth of immediate grief and allowing the needs of the dead to be attended to.

### First Person

At my father's funeral, after everybody that chose to shovel dirt onto his coffin was finished, I picked up the shovel and almost completely filled the hole. I felt compelled to do that, rather than have it done for me by strangers, and to this day I'm thankful that I had the privilege of that job.

--Leo J.

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## Honoring the dead (standing watch - *shemira*)

From the moment of death until burial the body is constantly attended. Tradition holds that at this time the soul of the deceased is in a painfully confused state, hovering over the body it recently inhabited. It has neither left this world, nor has it yet entered the world to come. Members of the community take turns sitting with the body, reciting psalms and other prayers to comfort the soul of the deceased.

## Purifying the body (*taharat haguf*)

The human body is considered a holy vessel in Jewish tradition. Thus, it is a great *mitzvah* to participate in washing the body and sanctifying it before burial. This *mitzvah* is performed by the *Hevrah Kadisha*, a voluntary group, rather than the actual family members. The body is washed limb by limb and water is poured onto the entire body for purification. The body is then dressed in white linen or cotton.

## Dust to dust: The wooden coffin

The principle "from dust you come and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19) dictates many burial customs. Consequently, the body is dressed in a shroud of natural fiber and buried in a coffin of plain wood, which should all decompose at about the same rate, so as not to impede the process of returning to the earth. (In Israel, no coffin whatsoever is used; bodies are placed directly in the soil). Judaism does not permit embalming or any measures that preserve the body or the coffin.

## A broken heart: (tearing the garment - *keriah*)

When immediate family members of the deceased enter the funeral home, their first act is to tear their shirts over the heart. This ripping is a concrete expression of heartbreak. It allows mourners to physically express what words cannot – the depth of their anguish at this time.

## Burial:

When the body is lowered into the grave, family members shovel earth onto the coffin. This

## First Person

There is an incredible amount of wisdom in the Jewish rituals of shiva, sheloshim, and yahrzeit. When my first wife died after a long illness, it was not totally unexpected---but it was still a shock. But the support of my rabbi, synagogue community and friends was amazing; and the different time frames for mourning seemed to correspond with my mental state. It takes a full 8 days just to come to grips with the basic loss; and at least a full month to feel that you'll be able to function again in society.

--George H.

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encourages the mourners to accept the reality of death and allows them to personally assist the body of their loved one into the ground.

## **Shiva** **The beginning of comfort**

This stage begins upon returning home from the cemetery.

### **The first meal**

Following the funeral, the mourner returns home and eats a "meal of condolence," symbolizing the beginning of the mourner's emergence from a kind of death state. Still in a deep state of grief, the mourner slowly begins to return to life by attending to his or her bodily needs.

This meal should be prepared by neighbors or other members of the community. It often consists of bread and hard boiled eggs. Eggs represent the circle of life, the cycle of birth and death. Ashes are often sprinkled on the egg to represent grief and loss.

### **Covering the mirrors**

Man was created in God's image. With a single death, the very image of God is diminished – and a reflection of the Divine Image is eclipsed. To symbolize this eclipse, the mirrors in a house of mourning are covered.

### **Sitting on the earth**

It is a custom for mourners to sit on low stools, or on the floor. This indicates the "low state" of the mourner. Visitors must be careful to sit in such a way that their heads are not level with, nor below, the mourner's.

### **A *shiva* call**

When a visitor pays a *shiva* call, he should enter quietly and sit near the mourner. It is customary to wait for the mourner to speak, rather than initiate conversation. Traditionally, conversation should provide an opportunity to celebrate the deceased. It is important to be attuned to the mourner's needs, and follow his lead.

[Kaddish](#), a special prayer said by mourners, is said at services. A *minyán* (quorum of ten) will generally convene at the mourner's home to help the mourner fulfill this *mitzvah*.

## ***Shloshim:*** **The first month**

*Shloshim* represents a further step towards reclamation of the mourner's life.

Following *shiva*, there are certain mourning rules that apply for the remainder of the 30 days after the burial. One continues to recite [Kaddish](#) with a *minyán*, at regular prayer times for a spouse, child, or sibling. (*Kaddish* is recited for a full 11 months only in honor of one's parents.)

One may not shave, or have a haircut. There are likewise prohibitions against getting married, attending parties, or wearing new clothes.

## **The first year of mourning**

The mourner continues to refrain from attending festive gatherings for a term of one year.

## **Remembering through the years**

**Yahrzeit** is a memorial anniversary of death. On this day there should be no rejoicing, no eating of meat or drinking alcohol. There is a custom of kindling a *yahrzeit* candle at dark on the evening before the anniversary of death. The flame and wick symbolize the soul and body of the deceased. One also recites the Mourner's Kaddish on this day.

Four times a year, at the [Yizkor service](#), we publicly remember those we mourn.

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*Mishpacha* is Hebrew for "family". So don't be a stranger: Send your comments to [mishpacha@yudel.com](mailto:mishpacha@yudel.com)

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